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SUICIDE IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT STUDIES.

PROFESSOR DURKHEIM's recent work on suicide¹ is, as the author himself declares, intended to illustrate his well-known conception of the social phenomenon, as unfolded in his previous essay on the *Méthode Sociologique*."² It deserves the most careful examination, since it offers a conclusive document for the complete appreciation of a doctrine which has raised the fiercest criticisms and has remained the manifestation of a solitary thought in the contemporary movement of social studies. Instead of answering his critics with theoretical dissertations, Durkheim has certainly done better in testing the value of his social interpretations through the study of a well-defined order of facts. Even if his attempt be a failure, and result in the demonstration of the inefficiency of his sociological conceptions, it is nevertheless true that his present researches on suicide lead to the most exhaustive exploration ever attempted since Wagner and Morselli of that phenomenon which seems to reflect, in a very typical way, the contrasts that imperil the life of modern societies. Thus, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also as an effective contribution to a scientific ascertainment of facts, the French professor's recent book commands the greatest interest.

I.

Durkheim commences by determining, above all, the notion of suicide. According to his definition, suicide is "every case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim itself, with the knowledge of its producing just that result."³ This definition has the

¹ *Le Suicide*, Etude de Sociologie, Paris, Alcan. 1897, pp. xii-462.

² *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*, Paris, Alcan. 1895, pp. viii-186.

³ *Le Suicide*, p. 5.

advantage of eliminating the vague and uncertain criterion of the so-called "freedom" of the act, substituting for it the character more directly ascertainable of a prevision of the consequences of the act itself. It thus permits us clearly to distinguish suicide from every other manner of death, in which the agent, as in the case of insane suicides, is himself the unconscious means of his own destruction, and also permits us to include, in the notion of suicide, all cases in which death is accepted as the inevitable condition of the attainment of an aim ; as, for instance, that of the soldier who sacrifices himself in order to save his regiment, or of the believer who calmly meets death for the triumph of his own faith.¹

At first sight, observes Durkheim, one is inclined to consider suicide as an act of the individual depending exclusively on individual factors. But, if we consider the *ensemble* of the suicides committed in a given society, we ascertain that the total thus obtained is not a mere sum of independent unities, *un tout de collection*, but that it constitutes, by itself, a new fact and, *sui generis* having an individuality of its own, consequently its own nature, which is, moreover, eminently social. In fact, being given a society, as long as we do not trace our observations too far back, the result is almost always invariable, the reason being that from one year to another the circumstances in which social life develops remain remarkably unchanged.² In proof of such a relative stability of the suicidal rate, Durkheim quotes the statistics of suicide for the principal countries of Europe (France, Prussia, England, Bavaria, Denmark, Saxony) from 1841 to 1872.³ According to Durkheim the relative invariability of the suicidal rate is greater than that of the chief demographic phenomena ; as, for instance, the general mortality which, from year to year, shows more oscillations than suicide. We cannot obtain a relative stability in general mortality without comparing the averages of long periods, instead of the total amount of successive years. In this case, however, the regularity results from the attenuation of the accidental changes

¹ *Le Suicide*, pp. 3-5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

occurring every year. Thus it is clear that the general death rate only attains such regularity by becoming something general and impersonal, that cannot be called upon to characterize a given society. In fact, it shows a remarkable similarity in all those nations that have more or less reached the identical state of civilization. On the contrary, suicide exhibits from year to year a stability equal to, if not greater than, that which general mortality only reveals from period to period ; while the suicidal rate shows very marked differences from one society to another, the difference being as 1 to 2, to 3, to 4, and even more. Thus, concludes Durkheim, the rate of suicide is peculiar to every social group in a much higher degree than the general death rate. It is even so intimately connected with that which is most deeply constitutional in every national temperament that, in respect to it, the order in which the different societies are classed remains almost rigorously the same at very different epochs.¹ The relative stability from one year to another in one and the same society, and the great variableness from one society to another in the same period, prove, according to Durkheim, that the rate of suicide is a definite fact corresponding to an order of causes entirely distinct from those that concur in determining suicide in every particular case.² It expresses the suicidal tendency which collectively affects each social group. Every society, says Durkheim, is predestined to furnish a determined share of voluntary deaths. To look into the causes of this collective tendency, that finds a numerical expression in the proportion of the absolute number of voluntary deaths to the population of every age and sex, is the problem Durkheim has undertaken to solve in his study on suicide.

II.

The first book of Durkheim's work deals with the question, whether such a collective tendency to suicide be the result of extra-social factors, like the organico-psychical predispositions,

¹ *Le Suicide*, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

or the character of the physical environment. Durkheim comes to the following conclusions :

1. *Insanity*.—Durkheim refutes as well the theory according to which suicide is nothing but a kind of monomania (Bourdin) as the theory which considers suicide an episode of one or many forms of insanity, not liable to appear in sane people (Esquirol). As to the former of these theories, Durkheim remarks that, in the present state of mental pathology, the existence of monomania can no longer be maintained. The hypothesis of monomania was based on the conception of distinct mental faculties which has given way to the conception of the organic unity of mind. Clinical experience has not yet ascertained the existence of one uncontested case of monomania. There is always in the so-called monomania a general morbid condition of the mind which is the root of the disease, the delirious ideas being but its superficial and temporary expression. Durkheim remarks that Esquirol's theory cannot be admitted without radically restraining the notion of suicide. There are suicides, and they constitute the majority, which are committed consciously, *i.e.*, with the full knowledge of the consequences. These cannot be included in one of the four types of insane suicide generally admitted by alienists : maniac, melancholic, obsessive, and impulsive suicide. Statistics prove, however, the absence of any connection in the manner in which suicide and insanity are respectively affected by age, sex, conjugal condition, race, nationality, and degree of civilization.¹

2. *Alcoholism*.—Durkheim denies the existence of any connection between the suicidal rate and alcoholism on the ground of the negative results shown by the comparison of the number of suicides with that of the *délits d'ivresse* of the cases of alcoholic insanity, and with the consumption of alcohol.²

3. *Race*.—Durkheim also refutes the theory which explains the different intensity of suicidal tendency by the influence of the racial factor. Above all, in the actual state of science the word "race" is a vague formula to which nothing definite may

¹ *Le Suicide*, pp. 20-46.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 46-53.

be found to correspond. On the one hand, the original races can only be said to belong to palæontology; while the more limited groups, now called races, are nothing but peoples, or societies of people, brethren by civilization more than by blood. The race thus conceived ends by identifying itself with nationality; consequently Durkheim is brought to contest the well-known theory of Morselli which distinguishes four different groups of peoples, each corresponding to a hereditary type of its own: the Germanic, the Celto-Roman, the Slav, the Uralo-Altaic; which should be classified, according to their suicidal tendency, in the following way: (1) Germans, (2) Celto-Romans, (3) Slavs; the Uralo-Altaic not being considered, as too divergent from the European type of civilization. Above all, observes Durkheim, there are some remarkable extremes in the suicidal tendency among peoples of the same race, while the high rate of suicide attributed to the so-called German race decreases or disappears when the German is transplanted from his own social *milieu*.¹

4. *Heredity*.—Nothing is less proved, says Durkheim, than the heredity of suicide, considered as a direct and integral transmission of the suicidal tendency from parents to children, so as to constitute a psychological automatism. All observed instances of repeated suicides in the same family originated in insanity. This is perhaps the disease which is most frequently transmitted, and one may well ask if it be not this latter rather than the suicidal tendency which is inherited. Such considerations, however, do not suffice to explain why in certain insane families there is an endemic tendency to suicide, why there should be “des souches de fous qui semblent destinées à se détruire.”² To explain this fact, Durkheim substitutes, for the factor of organic heredity, that of the contagious power of example. However, the thesis of the heredity of suicide is invalidated by two facts revealed by statistics: (1) the different contribution of the two sexes to suicide, which could not be explained in the hypothesis of an organico-psychical determin-

¹ *Le Suicide*, pp. 54-68.

² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

ism; (2) the increase of suicide with age, which proves that the cause of suicide is not a congenital and organic impulse. In this hypothesis, being governed by the rhythm of life, the suicidal tendency should pass through the successive phases of growth, immobility, and regression.¹

5. *Cosmical factors*.—The influence of climate on suicide is emphatically denied by Durkheim. As to the influence of temperature in the different seasons, he refutes the seductive theory of Morselli by which the increase of suicide in the particular months is explained by the mechanical action of heat on the nervous system. Durkheim remarks that such a theory presupposes suicide to be necessarily the outcome of a state of nervous excitement, while it, very often, results from great depression. Heat cannot act in the identical manner on the two forms of suicide. If temperature be the cause of the variations in the suicidal rate, then the changes in the two series should be parallel. Statistics prove the contrary. In general, and in all countries, suicide increases regularly from the beginning of the year and reaches a maximum in June, *i. e.*, not in the hottest months. It then decreases, reaching a minimum in December (Table XII). Besides, Morselli's explanation is unable to account for the low rate of suicide in southern Europe. According to Durkheim, the monthly oscillations of suicide are the result of "social" causes, as proved by their parallelism with the increasing length of days (Table XIII), and by the fact that suicides are generally committed in daytime, *i. e.*, when collective life is most intense. Thus for the action of cosmico-natural causes, as identified by Morselli with the changes of temperature, Durkheim substitutes the influence of the collective life, which undoubtedly increases in intensity with the lengthening of the days.²

III.

What are now the *social* causes of suicide? We find this question answered in Book II of Durkheim's work, that which

¹ *Le Suicide*, pp. 69-81.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 82-106.

contains, as it were, the nucleus of his researches. In this short sketch it is, of course, impossible for me to follow all his interesting developments. I must, therefore, refer the reader to the book itself for the statistical data and their detailed discussion. The following are the conclusions Durkheim arrives at. There are three principal types of suicide:

1. The "egoistic" suicide, comprising *all cases of voluntary death caused by relaxation of social ties, be they religious, familial, or political, i. e., by a morbid development of individualism*. Protestantism, in fact, shows a higher rate of suicide because of the stronger spirit of individualism by which it is dominated. It is, as Durkheim textually says, a less "integrated" society than the Catholic.¹ Marriage, likewise, shows a beneficial influence on suicide according to the greater or lesser degree of "integration" offered by the familial society. It is not the so-called "matrimonial selection" (Bertillon) which accounts for the relative immunity of the married as compared to the single, the widowed, and the divorced. Bertillon's hypothesis would render it difficult to explain either the different degrees of immunity shown by the married, according to their various ages, or the unequal immunity of the two sexes. The cause of immunity does not even lie in the fact of marriage itself, because (1) while the marriage rate has slightly changed since the beginning of the century, suicide has increased from 1 to 3; (2) the immunity is insignificant for the married without children. It is entirely due to the influence of the family as a social group and varies with its degree of "density" or "integration."² The same law governs the life of political societies. Suicide undergoes a real and general decrease at all epochs of political crises. Such a regression, first noticed by Morselli, is due to the strong degree of integration that societies reach through political perturbations. Great social commotions, like great national wars, stimulate the collective feelings, revive party spirit and patriotism, and concentrate individual activities towards a unique aim.³

¹ *Le Suicide*, pp. 149-73.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-22.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 174-214.

2. The "altruistic" suicide produced *by a violent predominance of society on individuals to the degree of destroying the consciousness of their own personality*. Under this head Durkheim studies (1) the suicides committed in primitive societies by old or sickly men, by women on the tombs of their husbands, by clients and dependents on the tombs of their masters; (2) the suicides of savages for futile motives; (3) the suicides committed through religious fanaticism, so common in India, this latter form being termed the "acute" altruistic suicide, which finds its most perfect expression in the mystic suicide; (4) the suicides committed by soldiers in modern armies (military suicide). In all these cases Durkheim explains suicide by the brutal submission of the individual to the social group, whereby he loses the consciousness of a destiny of his own and, therefore, every interest in life.¹

3. The "anomic" suicide, caused *by perturbations of the collective organization through which social control gives way, while individual desires lose every limit*. In fact, the limit imposed by society to the otherwise indefinite expansion of individual desires is a strong obstacle to suicidal tendency, in so far as it gives rise to that moral equilibrium which makes men satisfied with their lot and compels them to desire only that which they can reasonably expect to attain. Commercial and industrial crises do not favor an increase of suicide through impoverishment or economical uneasiness (this is the vulgar explanation), but merely by bringing about a disturbance in the collective control of individual wants which, therefore, go beyond the possibility of satisfaction.² The same reasons account for the high rate of suicide revealed in business and professional classes as compared to the agricultural.³ Divorce gives rise to what Durkheim terms "conjugal anomia," by which he explains the high suicidal tendency of the divorced.⁴ Here we see the intimate connection between the two forms of suicide, the "egoistic" and the "anomic." Practically, they can be considered as two aspects of an identical fact, viewed from two different standpoints.

¹ *Le Suicide*, pp. 233-63.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 264-71.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-311.

Thus Durkheim, finding a close relationship between the number of suicides and the intensity of the three causes already mentioned—(1) morbid individualism, (2) absorption of the individual by the group, (3) independence of individual from every moral restraint)—and finding that the rate of suicide varies from one country to another according to the different degree of intensity of said factors, comes to the conclusion that they are the real motives of the propensity to suicidal tendency particular to the various societies.

The individual factors (chiefly, nervous degeneration) do not have any influence on the social rate of suicide. They can only explain why one individual in preference to another should be liable to yield to the pressure of the *courant suicidogène*. The cause of the phenomenon goes beyond the individuals (“*est en dehors des individus*”).¹

IV.

In the foregoing summary the reader has gained a view of the main conclusions of Durkheim's researches on suicide. We do not need to follow the author in his discussion of the practical problem: as to the best means of restraining the suicidal tendency in modern societies, a question with which Book III of Durkheim's work deals. Nor do we intend to discuss the exactitude of the interpretations given by Durkheim to the statistical figures of suicide. Leaving this inquiry to professional statisticians, who will probably find much to say about some of Durkheim's statements, we only wish to ascertain whether or not he has succeeded in the ultimate aim of his studies on suicide, the verification of his conception of the social phenomenon. His conclusions on the character of the *courants suicidogènes* bring us just within the limits of his sociological theory. In the so-called “collective” causes of suicide, as opposed to the individual factors, reappears to us the favorite explanation of the social phenomenon which Durkheim has so strongly emphasized, that is to say the conception of its being

¹ *Le Suicide*, p. 366.

something "external" to the individual, endowed with a power of "constraint" upon him, therefore not deriving from him.

This theory has been bitterly criticised by Tarde,¹ who accused Durkheim of reproducing in the field of sociology the ontological delusion of mediæval realism, by conceiving society as an *essence* or a transcendental unity. We do not believe Tarde's interpretation of Durkheim's theory to be entirely correct, although it might apparently be justified by some obscure passages of Durkheim's essay on the *Méthode*.² When Durkheim emphasizes the antagonism between the concept of the individual and that of society, he does not, of course, suppose the possibility of a society without individuals, but only means that the aggregation of human beings termed "society" represents a reality of a different order from that represented by every individual, separately and singly considered. Nothing is more scientific than such a position. The process of cosmical evolution would be really inexplicable if we should fail to find in a complex fact new properties, new qualifications, widely differing from those of its single elements. Social fact has undoubtedly properties of its own that make it quite dissimilar to the individuals producing it by their aggregation, just in the same way as the biological phenomenon shows peculiarities unknown to its vital elements. In other words, we find in collective or social life the production of forces or powers not given in the individual organism. Even from the Tardian³ sociological standpoint, it is not permitted to deny the peculiar distinctive character of the social fact *versus* its elements, *i. e.*, the individuals. Invention, through imitation, undergoes a complex elaboration, thus reappearing in an impersonal and objective form through the products of social activity named institutions. Durkheim's error consists, I believe, in having misinterpreted the true rela-

¹ See "La Sociologie élémentaire" in *Annales de l'Institut International de Sociologie*, 1895.

² "L'individu écarte, il ne reste que la société." *Les Règles*, p. 125. See also pp. 9-10 and 37.

³ For a more detailed statement of Tarde's theory see my paper in *Political Science Quarterly*, September, 1897.

tionship of the "element" to the "whole" in all combinations. Social fact exhibits properties of its own, but what is its point of departure, if not the combination of individuals? These latter undoubtedly are an essential factor of the social phenomenon, for the same reason that the elements of a chemical combination are essential factors of the chemical compound. Durkheim completely overlooks the fact that *a compound is explained both by the character of its elements and by the law of their interaction*. He tries to explain the "product" by the "product" itself, thus overthrowing the scientific conception of cause. It is a startling error of logic, all the more astonishing in a logician of Durkheim's subtlety.

Moving from such an erroneous conception of the social phenomenon, Durkheim is necessarily misled in his interpretations of suicide.

True to his view of social fact as something extraneous to the individual and, therefore, independent of him, Durkheim tries above all to demonstrate the inefficiency of the individual factors in suicide. But even if such demonstration were possible, the way in which he carries it out seems the least apt to lead to serious results. He examines successively the relationship of suicide to insanity, to alcoholism, and to other extra-social factors, taking each one in isolation in order to ascertain a constancy of interaction in which the true cause of suicide should be seen. He completely forgets that a social fact is *never* the result of a unique cause. Social fact is a complex product resulting from a combination of different elements, mutually modifying one another. It is impossible, under such circumstances, to find the "unique" or the "pure" cause in one individual factor to the exclusion of others. As Professor Bosco, the Italian statistician, justly remarks in an interesting review of Durkheim's book,¹ "social fact being always profoundly complex, it is difficult to ascertain in every instance the working of a given cause. It suffices that its influence be ascertained in a certain number of cases, and that, above all, there be a possibil-

¹ See *Rivista Italiana di Sociologia*, November, 1887, pp. 378-9.

ity of explaining the fact by presupposing its action." Durkheim asks too much of statistics. They could never prove that suicide depends on insanity *alone*, or on alcoholism *alone*, or on the physical environment *alone*. The continual oscillations shown by the statistical series, however slight they may be, are just the best proof of a continual interaction of factors in the production of the social phenomenon.

Having established that none of the so-called extra-social factors is the "unique" cause of suicide—which, moreover, was so evident as to render perfectly useless such an ostentatious display of arguments—Durkheim flatters himself to be the discoverer of the philosopher's stone of the *purely* social cause of suicide.

What are, now, these alleged causes?

1. The want of social "integration" (egoistic suicide).
2. The violent absorption of the individual by the community (altruistic suicide).
3. The lack of social control over individual desires (anomic suicide).

But in all these three typical instances Durkheim necessarily presupposes a *normal* condition of equilibrium in the relationship of the individual to the community. Suicide, then, appears to be, in its three typical forms, the result of a rupture in the accommodation of the individual mind to the social environment. This rupture cannot take place without the concomitance of a predisposition on the part of the individual, otherwise we could not explain the fact that some yield to the *courant suicidogène*, and some do not. Then the three alleged social causes presuppose the incidence of an abnormal and enfeebling condition of the social *milieu*, with a predisposition to mental disturbance in the individual. If they cannot work independently of such a *rencontre*, we have the right to ask whether in reality anything corresponds to the "social" causes, as conceived by Durkheim. In so far as the three types of suicide show the intersection, as it were, of an individual organic predisposition by a collective morbid agent, we are able to verify

the first part of our statement relating to the impossibility of explaining the "compound" without taking into account the character of its elements. But the second part of the same statement, as to the necessity of taking into account, also, the law of the combination of the elements, will also be clear if we note that the "social" causes of suicide necessarily presuppose the action of society upon individuals in the only intelligible way, *i. e.*, by the way of transmission of modes of feeling, thought, and action through the imitative response to the suggestive inventiveness. Thus the so-called social causes of suicide discovered by Durkheim appear to be nothing but *verbal* entities, *flatus vocis*, if not connected, on the one side, with the individual factor of nervous degeneration and, on the other, with the general fact of the transmission of thought through "imitative instinct," which is at the very basis of social intercourse, as has been masterfully shown by Tarde and Baldwin.

Durkheim, it is true, believes that he has completely undermined the Tardian theory of imitation by demonstrating that the meaning attached by Tarde to the word "imitation" is entirely different from the usual acceptance of the word, and by giving a so-called scientific definition of imitation, which arbitrarily restricts the word so as only to indicate "acts which have as immediate antecedents the representation of a similar act accomplished before by others, *without any intellectual operation affecting the intimate character of the reproduced act ever having been inserted between the representation and the execution.*"¹ It is not necessary for me to refute a criticism of that kind, which only shows a complete misunderstanding of the fundamental idea of Tarde. What Tarde has roughly expressed by the word "imitation" is simply the fact of the influence of one brain upon another brain as incidental to the typical character of social fact, which is, essentially, a transmission of thought. A conclusive refutation of the Tardian theory should have been directed against the fact itself and not against the word chosen

¹ *Le Suicide*, p. 115; see the whole chapter "L'Imitation," dedicated to the demolition of Tarde's theory. Pp. 107-38.

to express it. The question is not whether the word indicating the fact be more or less well selected, but rather if the fact itself be true or not. After Baldwin's studies on imitation, which seem, however, to be completely ignored by Durkheim, it would be an aimless enterprise to waste words in demonstrating the efficacy of imitation in social life. The fact, moreover, is so overwhelmingly evident that Durkheim, although strongly denying it, is, at every moment, unconsciously brought to presuppose it in all his interpretations, as every impartial and competent reader of his book will undoubtedly be disposed to admit.

V.

Thus, by a strange irony, the outcome of this book on suicide is just the contrary of what the author expected it to be. Instead of demonstrating the alleged independence of the social phenomenon from the action of individual factors, it ends in the best verification of the opposite conception of social fact as resulting from the combined studies of Tarde and Baldwin. In spite of Durkheim's vigorous dialectic temper and his ability in the collection and presentation of statistical data, his desperate attempt to prove the positive character of his conception of society is a complete failure. Social causes, social influences, social integration, all the formulæ by which Durkheim endeavors to concrete his conception of the independence of the social fact from the action of individual causes, are mere words, if we do not refer them to the living element of the individuals whose mutual interaction makes society. The utility of Durkheim's work lies chiefly in the fact that it brings about the *reductio ad absurdum* of his sociological system, the most apt to mislead scientific inquiry into the field of social phenomena by its false character of objectivity and the magistral arrangement of pseudo-proofs. The way is now cleared of a great obstacle. We must, henceforth, keep straight to the path through which the greatest conquest of modern thought has been made in the line of sociological research—I mean the discovery of that law of imitation which, in spite of Durkheim's grammatical or philo-

logical criticism, remains the cornerstone of any possible interpretation of social life. We must not let ourselves be hampered by Durkheim's *simplisme*; social fact is too intricate a web to be so easily unraveled. Let us never forget the law of scientific logic stated repeatedly above, "a compound is only explained by the character of its elements and by the law of their interaction." There we have the touchstone that enables us to determine the chimerical or the scientific character of contemporary contributions to the interpretation of the social enigma.

GUSTAVO TOSTI.

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